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LITERARY SHOP.

BY ANDREW LANG.

EVERYBODY likes to talk his own "shop," even though (as Herodotus remarks about the dancing of Hippocleides) it be "pleasing to himself but distasteful to others." Mr. Rideing's recent article on "Literary Life in London," affords a temptation to talk the "shop" of "literature." As a "literary gent," I read his remarks not only to my entertainment, but to my instruction. There is so much in the essay that comes as a novelty to one who is in London (when he cannot help it), but who is not of it.

As in Rome Virgil sighed for the fields, "Spercheius and Taygetus, where wander the Lacænian maids," so in London a desire of Yarrow and Tweed possesses me. Yet, being in London, one would talk the shop of letters if one had an opportunity. Mr. Rideing knows many golden opportunities, knows clubs in Fleet Street, "where all the talk is literary shop." How does a man get into these pleasant successors of Bays and the Cocoa Tree? I never heard of them before. 'Perhaps some eminent person, some great author, there gives his little senate laws, like Addison, "while wits and Templars every sentence raise." One is reminded of great Anna's golden prime. Perhaps the members of the clubs call for Florence or Margout, possibly they wear perruques.

The Vagabond's Club I do know; at least, I have partaken of their hospitality. It is proper to say that, if any of the fair guests did "smoke cigarettes," they were few and inconspicuous. As for literary shop, it was not to be found; there are, after all, better topics. Then the "fascinating little club" in the Park, is it a dream of Mr. Rideing's? I never surprised the literary nymphs, as Actæon did Diana, "under the chestnuts and beeches,

on sunny mornings," or in the Serpentine. How do they find time to go there on sunny mornings? As to "literary receptions and teas," we may practise at the pen, in London, and never even hear of their existence. To be sure, receptions and teas are less attractive than the cricket ground of the late Mr. Lord, where an exquisite modern poet* did once entertain me with literary shop, displaying an epicurean indifference to the fortunes of Oxford in a struggle with M. C. C.

And the other side, the side of lettered "poverty and horror?" One feels like the Levite who passed by on the other side of the way, and yet one has not met the literary wayfarer "who fell among thieves," though, of course, one has heard "publisher stories." Such unhappy devils are "writers of adventure stories for boys." Three eminent hands in this noble art I have known. They did not lunch on biscuits in the reading room of the British Museum; indeed, I do not think they frequented that mausoleum. They appeared to enjoy an enviable prosperity.

All this ignorance is probably common in the profession which, says Mr. Rideing, "has very little *esprit de corps*." We have all *esprit*, of course, in abundance, but there is not any *corps*; no definite body with examinations, diplomas, traditions, regulations. *Esprit de corps*, without a *corps* for the *esprit* to inhabit, is unthinkable, so far I will go with the Materialists. How can each of us have pride in all the others? We are not even so well combined and marshalled as Falstaff's regiment; in the nature of things we have nothing in common with each other, except ink, and ink, as Mr. Rideing justly remarks, is not our property. All the world may use it. The literary man "is not taken seriously." I think he is, when he possesses the adorable faculty of taking himself *au sérieux*. But, when the professed man of letters enters another field he becomes an amateur, and must expect to be treated as such. A literary man "is not taken seriously" in the House of Commons. *C'est selon*. Sheridan was taken seriously; so, for a considerable period, was Mr. Disraeli, and I doubt if Mr. Lecky is contumeliously regarded. Sir George Trevelyan gave up to politics what was meant for mankind, alas, and a born man of letters became "a frivolous Member of Parliament." Yet he has held high office.

*Mr. A—— D——

The world has always laughed at the poet, as a man. They had their jests at him even in Celtic society. If he will wear long hair and a cloak, he must take the consequences. We cannot have everything. "The madness which is of God" may be wiser than the wisdom of men, but we cannot expect men to see it in that light. Poetry, as a general though not invariable rule, demands a life of retreat, fugitive and cloistered. More poets have lived like Wordsworth or Tennyson than like Scott. If a man will "go booing about the woods," he cannot hope to be seriously regarded by those who go "booing" to political meetings.

Then comes the ardent question of titles and state honors. These, in England, are bestowed on rich political people, on members of the public service, on artists, and actors (once or twice), on doctors and scientific characters. Honors for literary men are rare. There was Scott's baronetcy; he wanted it (as a man of family with feudal principles, not as a man of letters) and he got it. The Sheriff was knightly, by nature, and they gave him his spurs. It is probable that several men of letters have managed to decline official honors. When Lord Tennyson accepted gracefully what his sovereign gracefully and gratefully gave, some literary persons "booed" at him. The great poet neither coveted nor churlishly refused official recognition. To him the matter, we may believe, was purely indifferent. And it really is indifferent to most men of letters. Knighthoods, as a common rule, come to the beknighted because of their much asking, except when they come in an official routine, in the public service. Having nothing official about us, having no routine, we cannot look to receiving ribbons and orders. And, I hope, we cannot be expected to sue, and pester, and hint, and intrigue for bits of ribbons! Is it not agreeable to be out of that kind of work, to pull no strings, to solicit no Academician for his vote and interest? Am I to envy my college contemporaries, who, being of a certain seniority in the public service, blossom into K. C. B.'s?

We cannot easily, or with dignity and self-respect, shout for prizes very common in other businesses. The palmy days for men of letters departed with the last of the Stuarts. Addison, Steele and the rest had offices. Mat Prior was an ambassador, though I have seen a letter of Queen Anne in which she objected that Mat was not heradically a gentleman. Then arrived George I. "He hated arts and despised literature, but he liked train oil in

his salad, and gave an enlightened patronage to bad oysters." With him and Walpole came a new era, not friendly to the wits. The tradition of that era has survived in the official world. It was a king who made Scott a baronet, a queen who made Tennyson a peer; the common run of knights are children of the official world. Thackeray wrote very sensibly on the theme, and really I do not see that literature would be elevated if a few more mediocre notorieties, third rate novelists, were saluted as "Sir." Already we have several "Sirs." We may come to be as beknighted as the medical gentlemen (who, to be sure, deserve all the honors they get), but it does not seem a thing to strive and cry for at public dinners. Our position, in such exclamations, is too like that of the baby who wants the soap in a popular work of art. I have known a number of men who write, and I never heard one of them allude, in any way, to this business of the equestrian rank, in private conversation. It did not seem ever to have entered their minds, not that they "took no pride in their profession," but they did not care. As to "pride" in their profession, it is rather pleasure than pride that a man takes. Unlike most lines of business, this one is adopted because we like it. The taste may seem odd, but like it we do, which amply compensates us for the lack of ribbons. Of course, I do not maintain that the baby should not have his cake of soap, or that a novelist is less worthy of official notice than a brewer, a provincial mayor, or a gentleman in the Education Office. But all these characters have a traditional claim to be dubbed knight; they want it, they would feel unjustly treated if they did not get it. We have no such traditional claims, and very few of us are excited on the subject, or "won't be happy till we get it," or try to set up a new tradition. Our ambition takes other lines, or perhaps we are entirely content with our work, which we find amusing. It cannot be amusing to be a brewer, a mayor, or immersed in the routine of the Civil Service.

The grievance of being cut out by the distinguished amateur is another question. Mr. Gladstone wrote on Homer, on Miracles, on Biblical criticism, *en amateur*. Did he cut out any professional? Probably not; his books might be more prattled about, at "literary receptions," and more promptly reviewed than those of experts, but experts do not write for the prattlers. Mr. Gladstone made no mark on the alien studies to which he devoted his energetic leisure.

The distinguished amateur, of course, has the advertisement of his distinction, but that is part of the nature of things. Moreover, the amateur may be a better man than the professional. Mr. Grote was a banker, but an excellent historian, and no Homeric scholar grudges the eminence of Mr. Walter Leaf, whose days are given to practical affairs. I do not know (being unphilosophic) how great Mr. Balfour may be as a philosopher, but the general reader knows, as a preliminary fact, that Mr. Balfour possesses no ordinary intelligence. Therefore he listens to him rather more eagerly than to a metaphysician in a college, about whom he knows nothing at all.

On the pecuniary side of the literary life, I feel no competence to write. It is regulated by economic laws. Mr. Rideing's young lady of genius cannot make a competence by producing excellent short stories. As the public does not read short stories (except in one or two cases) I am not surprised to hear of her failure. Even Mr. Stevenson could not have lived by short stories alone. Mr. Kipling would have a much more extensive circulation if he wrote long novels with as much acceptance as he writes *contes*. Nobody can make anything like the income of a successful barrister or doctor, by writing anything except novels, usually bad; but, in some mysterious way, dear to people who are nothing less than literary. Men write on history and various other learned themes, because they like to do so; the public is indifferent, the critics are (as a rule) ignorant and unconcerned. A novelist makes hay while the sun shines, and it appears that, to vary the figure, he kills by his exactions, the goose of the golden eggs, the speculative publisher. Perhaps he also kills his own little noisy talent, by shouting one novel into a phonograph, while he develops another with a typewriter; all this at four in the morning! It is a story for which one wants documentary evidence at first hand, as in *Psychical Research*. I have known a novelist who wrote in the dawning hours, but that was because he wanted to play several rounds of golf later. A phonograph was not among his tools.

There remains the matter of the Author's Agent. He saves publishers and authors a great deal of trouble, and may even prevent an author's relations with his publisher from being "stripped of all sentiment." If the pair are friends, they need never allude to business at all. The agent discusses the odious details.

There still exist even popular novelists whose publishers are their private friends. In such a case, I presume that neither "the methods" nor "the manners" of the agent are "bad." His is a new business; if undertaken by a person of tact and sense it may fill a useful place. If undertaken by a greedy, pushing, unscrupulous bagman, the business will not last long. The business is not, or ought not to be, to "create discord," but to arrive at just covenants without personal friction. However, a writer who is not a popular novelist can know nothing practically about authors' agents. They, or somebody of their sort, appear to be needed by the successful writers who never succeed in being properly remunerated. All this has next to nothing to do with literary life, which is concerned with good letters, not with six shilling novels, and the *Chrematistiké* of scribbling. The study, and the creation, of good literature have very rarely been, and are more and more unlikely to be, a lucrative affair. Letters, like virtue, are their own reward. But perhaps this view is not popular at literary tea parties; perhaps Royalties and so much "per thousand" are there held fitter themes for erudite discussion. Perhaps there is now such a being as the commercial *precieux*!

ANDREW LANG.